



FOCUS Creon defends himself against Oedipus' charge of treason. Read to find out how Oedipus treats Creon in this scene.

(Enter Creon from the side.)

Creon. My fellow-citizens, I hear King Oedipus
levels terrible charges at me. I had to come.
575 I resent it deeply. If, in the present crisis,
he thinks he suffers any abuse from me,
anything I've done or said that offers him
the slightest injury, why, I've no desire
to linger out this life, my reputation in ruins.
580 The damage I'd face from such an accusation
is nothing simple. No, there's nothing worse:
branded a traitor in the city, a traitor
to all of you and my good friends.

Leader. True,
but a slur might have been forced out of him,
585 by anger perhaps, not any firm conviction.

Creon. The charge was made in public, wasn't it?
I put the prophet up to spreading lies?

Leader. Such things were said . . .
I don't know with what intent, if any.

590 **Creon.** Was his glance steady, his mind right
when the charge was brought against me?

Leader. I really couldn't say. I never look
to judge the ones in power.

(The doors open. Oedipus enters.)

Wait,
here's Oedipus now.

Oedipus. You—here? You have the gall
595 to show your face before the palace gates?
You, plotting to kill me, kill the king—
I see it all, the marauding thief himself
scheming to steal my crown and power!

Tell me,
600 in god's name, what did you take me for,
coward or fool, when you spun out your plot?
Your treachery—you think I'd never detect it
creeping against me in the dark? Or sensing it,
not defend myself? Aren't you the fool,
you and your high adventure. Lacking numbers,

594 gall: rude boldness.

597 marauding: roaming in search of plunder.



605 powerful friends, out for the big game of empire—
you need riches, armies to bring that quarry down!

606 **quarry**: the object of a hunt.

Creon. Are you quite finished? It's your turn to listen
for just as long as you've . . . instructed me.
Hear me out, then judge me on the facts.

610 **Oedipus.** You've a wicked way with words, Creon,
but I'll be slow to learn—from you.
I find you a menace, a great burden to me.

Creon. Just one thing, hear me out in this.

Oedipus. Just one thing,
don't tell *me* you're not the enemy, the traitor.

615 **Creon.** Look, if you think crude, mindless stubbornness
such a gift, you've lost your sense of balance.

Oedipus. If you think you can abuse a kinsman,
then escape the penalty, you're insane.

Creon. Fair enough, I grant you. But this injury
620 you say I've done you, what is it?

Oedipus. Did you induce me, yes or no,
to send for that sanctimonious prophet?

Creon. I did. And I'd do the same again.

Oedipus. All right then, tell me, how long is it now
625 since Laius . . .

Creon. Laius—what did *he* do?

Oedipus. Vanished,
swept from sight, murdered in his tracks.

Creon. The count of the years would run you far back . . .

Oedipus. And that far back, was the prophet at his trade?

Creon. Skilled as he is today, and just as honored.

630 **Oedipus.** Did he ever refer to me then, at that time?

Creon. No,
never, at least, when I was in his presence.

Oedipus. But you did investigate the murder, didn't you?

Creon. We did our best, of course, discovered nothing.

Oedipus. But the great seer never accused me then—why
not?

635 **Creon.** I don't know. And when I don't, *I* keep quiet.

Oedipus. You do know this, you'd tell it too—
if you had a shred of decency.

622 **sanctimonious** (săngk'tə-
mō'nē-əs): making a show of being
holy or pious.

WORDS TO KNOW



Creon. What?

If I know, I won't hold back.

Oedipus. Simply this:

if the two of you had never put heads together,
640 we would never have heard about *my* killing Laius.

Creon. If that's what he says . . . well, you know best.

But now I have a right to learn from you
as you just learned from me.

Oedipus. Learn your fill,
you never will convict me of the murder.

645 **Creon.** Tell me, you're married to my sister, aren't you?

Oedipus. A genuine discovery—there's no denying that.

Creon. And you rule the land with her, with equal power?

Oedipus. She receives from me whatever she desires.

Creon. And I am the third, all of us are equals?

650 **Oedipus.** Yes, and it's there you show your stripes—
you betray a kinsman.

Creon. Not at all.

Not if you see things calmly, rationally,
as I do. Look at it this way first:
who in his right mind would rather rule
655 and live in anxiety than sleep in peace?
Particularly if he enjoys the same authority.
Not I, I'm not the man to yearn for kingship,
not with a king's power in my hands. Who would?
No one with any sense of self-control.
660 Now, as it is, you offer me all I need,
not a fear in the world. But if I wore the crown . . .
there'd be many painful duties to perform,
hardly to my taste.

How could kingship
please me more than influence, power
665 without a qualm? I'm not that deluded yet,
to reach for anything but privilege outright,
profit free and clear.

Now all men sing my praises, all salute me,
now all who request your favors curry mine.
670 I am their best hope: success rests in me.
Why give up that, I ask you, and borrow trouble?
A man of sense, someone who sees things clearly

665 qualm: feeling of uneasiness
or doubt.

669 curry: seek by flattery.



would never resort to treason.
No, I have no lust for conspiracy in me,
675 nor could I ever suffer one who does.

Do you want proof? Go to Delphi yourself,
examine the oracle and see if I've reported
the message word-for-word. This too:
if you detect that I and the clairvoyant
680 have plotted anything in common, arrest me,
execute me. Not on the strength of one vote,
two in this case, mine as well as yours.
But don't convict me on sheer unverified surmise.
How wrong it is to take the good for bad,
685 purely at random, or take the bad for good.
But reject a friend, a kinsman? I would as soon
tear out the life within us, priceless life itself.
You'll learn this well, without fail, in time.
Time alone can bring the just man to light—
690 the criminal you can spot in one short day.

679 clairvoyant: person who can see the future—here, Tiresias.

683 unverified: not proved to be true.

Leader. Good advice,
my lord, for anyone who wants to avoid disaster.
Those who jump to conclusions may go wrong.

Oedipus. When my enemy moves against me quickly,
plots in secret, I move quickly too, I must,
695 I plot and pay him back. Relax my guard a moment,
waiting his next move—he wins his objective,
I lose mine.

Creon. What do you want?
You want me banished?

Oedipus. No, I want you dead.

Creon. Just to show how ugly a grudge can . . .

Oedipus. So,
700 still stubborn? you don't think I'm serious?

Creon. I think you're insane.

Oedipus. Quite sane—in my behalf.

Creon. Not just as much in mine?

Oedipus. You—my mortal enemy?

Creon. What if you're wholly wrong?

Oedipus. No matter—I must rule.

WORDS TO KNOW



Creon. Not if you rule unjustly.

Oedipus. Hear him, Thebes, my city!

705 **Creon.** My city too, not yours alone!

Leader. Please, my lords.

(Enter Jocasta from the palace.)

Look, Jocasta's coming,
and just in time too. With her help
you must put this fighting of yours to rest.

710 **Jocasta.** Have you no sense? Poor misguided men,
such shouting—why this public outburst?
Aren't you ashamed, with the land so sick,
to stir up private quarrels?

(to Oedipus)

Into the palace now. And Creon, you go home.
Why make such a furor over nothing?

715 **Creon.** My sister, it's dreadful . . . Oedipus, your husband,
he's bent on a choice of punishments for me,
banishment from the fatherland or death.

Oedipus. Precisely. I caught him in the act, Jocasta,
plotting, about to stab me in the back.

720 **Creon.** Never—curse me, let me die and be damned
if I've done you any wrong you charge me with.

Jocasta. Oh god, believe it, Oedipus,
honor the solemn oath he swears to heaven.
Do it for me, for the sake of all your people.

(The Chorus begins to chant.)

725 **Chorus.** Believe it, be sensible
give way, my king, I beg you!

Oedipus. What do you want from me, concessions?

727 concessions: favors.

Chorus. Respect him—he's been no fool in the past
and now he's strong with the oath he swears to god.

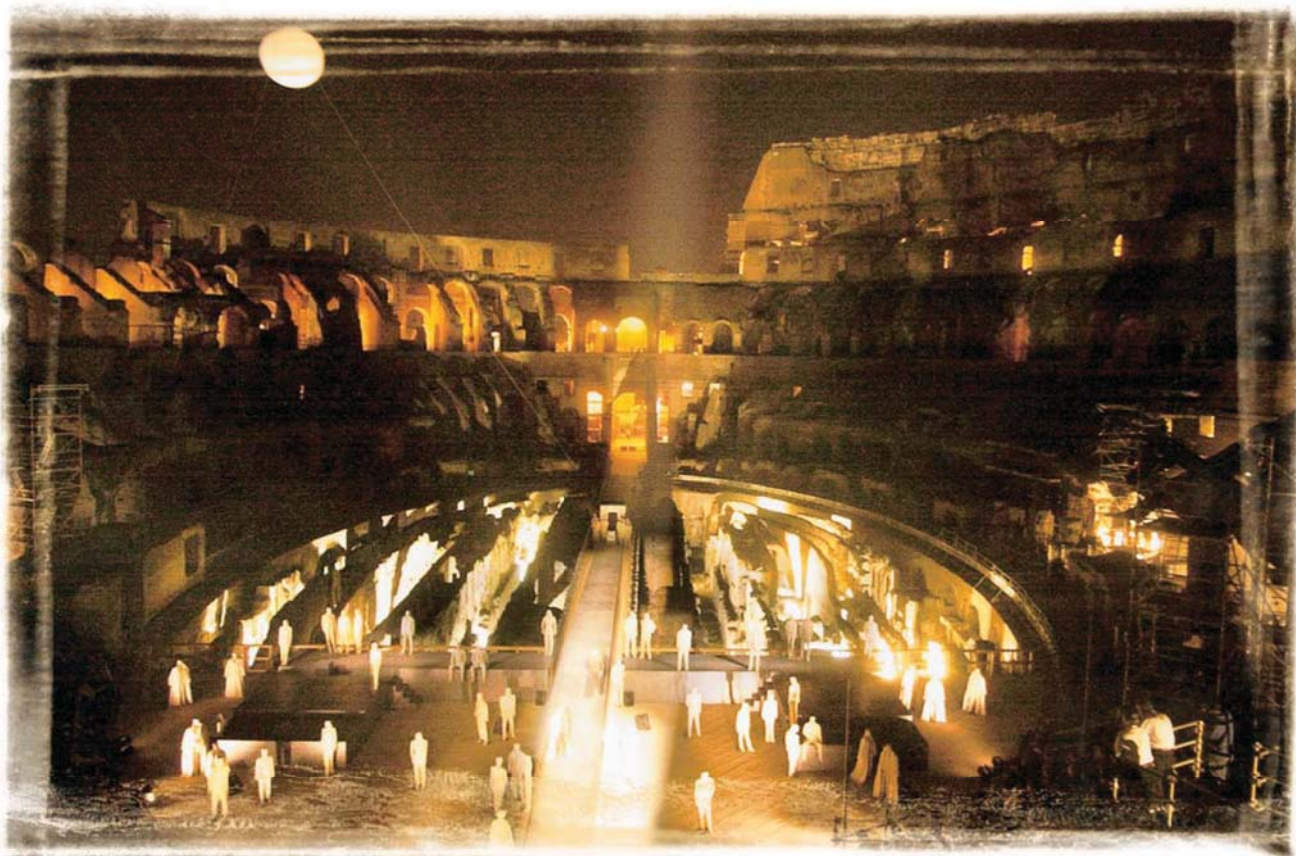
730 **Oedipus.** You know what you're asking?

Chorus. I do.

Oedipus. Then out with it!

Chorus. The man's your friend, your kin, he's under oath—
don't cast him out, disgraced
branded with guilt on the strength of hearsay only.

Oedipus. Know full well, if that is what you want



The Greek National Theater's performance of *Oedipus the King* in Rome's Colosseum (2000). Most of the figures shown here are statues, used to create a backdrop for the action.

735 you want me dead or banished from the land.

Chorus.

Never—

no, by the blazing Sun, first god of the heavens!

Stripped of the gods, stripped of loved ones,
let me die by inches if that ever crossed my mind.
But the heart inside me sickens, dies as the land dies
740 and now on top of the old griefs you pile this,
your fury—both of you!

Oedipus.

Then let him go,

even if it does lead to my ruin, my death
or my disgrace, driven from Thebes for life.
It's you, not him I pity—your words move me.
745 He, wherever he goes, my hate goes with him.

Creon. Look at you, sullen in yielding, brutal in your rage—
you will go too far. It's perfect justice:
natures like yours are hardest on themselves.



Oedipus. Then leave me alone—get out!

Creon. I'm going.

750 You're wrong, so wrong. These men know I'm right.

(Exit to the side.)

PAUSE & REFLECT Why does Oedipus turn against Creon?

FOCUS As Creon leaves, Oedipus is still very angry. Jocasta tries to calm him down. Unintentionally, however, she awakens his deepest fears. Read to find out why he suddenly becomes afraid.

(The Chorus turns to Jocasta.)

Chorus. Why do you hesitate, my lady
why not help him in?

Jocasta. Tell me what's happened first.

755 **Chorus.** Loose, ignorant talk started dark suspicions
and a sense of injustice cut deeply too.

Jocasta. On both sides?

Chorus. Oh yes.

Jocasta. What did they say?

Chorus. Enough, please, enough! The land's so racked already
or so it seems to me . . .
End the trouble here, just where they left it.

760 **Oedipus.** You see what comes of your good intentions now?
And all because you tried to blunt my anger.

761 blunt: make less sharp.

Chorus. My king,
I've said it once, I'll say it time and again—
I'd be insane, you know it,
senseless, ever to turn my back on you.
765 You who set our beloved land—storm-tossed,
shattered—
straight on course. Now again, good helmsman,
steer us through the storm!

(The Chorus draws away, leaving Oedipus and Jocasta side by side.)

Jocasta. For the love of god,
Oedipus, tell me too, what is it?
Why this rage? You're so unbending.



770 **Oedipus.** I will tell you. I respect you, Jocasta,
much more than these men here . . .

(*glancing at the Chorus*)

Creon's to blame, Creon schemes against me.

Jocasta. Tell me clearly, how did the quarrel start?

Oedipus. He says *I* murdered Laius—I am guilty.

775 **Jocasta.** How does he know? Some secret knowledge
or simple hearsay?

Oedipus. Oh, he sent his prophet in
to do his dirty work. You know Creon,
Creon keeps his own lips clean.

Jocasta. A prophet?

Well then, free yourself of every charge!

780 Listen to me and learn some peace of mind:
no skill in the world,
nothing human can penetrate the future.
Here is proof, quick and to the point.

785 An oracle came to Laius one fine day
(I won't say from Apollo himself
but his underlings, his priests) and it declared
that doom would strike him down at the hands of a son,
our son, to be born of our own flesh and blood. But Laius,
so the report goes at least, was killed by strangers,
790 thieves, at a place where three roads meet . . . my son—
he wasn't three days old and the boy's father
fastened his ankles, had a henchman fling him away
on a barren, trackless mountain.

792 **henchman:** trusted follower.

There, you see?
Apollo brought neither thing to pass. My baby
795 no more murdered his father than Laius suffered—
his wildest fear—death at his own son's hands.
That's how the seers and all their revelations
mapped out the future. Brush them from your mind.
Whatever the god needs and seeks
800 he'll bring to light himself, with ease.

Oedipus. Strange,
hearing you just now . . . my mind wandered,
my thoughts racing back and forth.

Jocasta. What do you mean? Why so anxious, startled?



Oedipus. I thought I heard you say that Laius
805 was cut down at a place where three roads meet.
Jocasta. That was the story. It hasn't died out yet.
Oedipus. Where did this thing happen? Be precise.
Jocasta. A place called Phocis, where two branching roads,
one from Daulia, one from Delphi,
810 come together—a crossroads.
Oedipus. When? How long ago?
Jocasta. The heralds no sooner reported Laius dead
than you appeared and they hailed you king of Thebes.
Oedipus. My god, my god—what have you planned to do
to me?
815 **Jocasta.** What, Oedipus? What haunts you so?
Oedipus. Not yet.
Laius—how did he look? Describe him.
Had he reached his prime?
Jocasta. He was swarthy,
and the gray had just begun to streak his temples,
and his build . . . wasn't far from yours.
Oedipus. Oh no no,
820 I think I've just called down a dreadful curse
upon myself—I simply didn't know!
Jocasta. What are you saying? I shudder to look at you.
Oedipus. I have a terrible fear the blind seer can see.
I'll know in a moment. One thing more—
Jocasta. Anything,
825 afraid as I am—ask, I'll answer, all I can.
Oedipus. Did he go with a light or heavy escort,
several men-at-arms, like a lord, a king?
Jocasta. There were five in the party, a herald among them,
and a single wagon carrying Laius.
Oedipus. Ai—
830 now I can see it all, clear as day.
Who told you all this at the time, Jocasta?
Jocasta. A servant who reached home, the lone survivor.
Oedipus. So, could he still be in the palace—even now?
Jocasta. No indeed. Soon as he returned from the scene
835 and saw you on the throne with Laius dead and gone,

808 Phocis (fō's'īs): a region of central Greece, between Delphi and Thebes.

809 Daulia (dō'lē-ə).

WORDS TO KNOW

swarthy (swôr'thē) *adj.* having a dark complexion



he knelt and clutched my hand, pleading with me
to send him into the hinterlands, to pasture,
far as possible, out of sight of Thebes.
I sent him away. Slave though he was,
840 he'd earned that favor—and much more.

Oedipus. Can we bring him back, quickly?

Jocasta. Easily. Why do you want him so?

Oedipus. I am afraid,
Jocasta, I have said too much already.
That man—I've got to see him.

Jocasta. Then he'll come.
845 But even I have a right, I'd like to think,
to know what's torturing you, my lord.

Oedipus. And so you shall—I can hold nothing back from
you,
now I've reached this pitch of dark foreboding.
Who means more to me than you? Tell me,
850 whom would I turn toward but you
as I go through all this?

My father was Polybus, king of Corinth.
My mother, a Dorian, Merope. And I was held
the prince of the realm among the people there,
855 till something struck me out of nowhere,
something strange . . . worth remarking perhaps,
hardly worth the anxiety I gave it.
Some man at a banquet who had drunk too much
shouted out—he was far gone, mind you—
860 that I am not my father's son. Fighting words!
I barely restrained myself that day
but early the next I went to mother and father,
questioned them closely, and they were enraged
at the accusation and the fool who let it fly.
865 So as for my parents I was satisfied,
but still this thing kept gnawing at me,
the slander spread—I had to make my move.

And so,
unknown to mother and father I set out for Delphi,
and the god Apollo spurned me, sent me away
870 denied the facts I came for,
but first he flashed before my eyes a future
great with pain, terror, disaster—I can hear him cry,

853 Dorian (dôr'ē-ən): descended from Dorus, the ancestor of one of the main divisions of the Greek people; **Merope** (měr'ə-pē').

866 gnawing at: biting at; tormenting.

867 slander: statements that unfairly harm a person's reputation.

869 spurned: rejected.



“You are fated to couple with your mother, you will
bring
a breed of children into the light no man can bear to
see—
875 you will kill your father, the one who gave you life!”
I heard all that and ran. I abandoned Corinth,
from that day on I gauged its landfall only
by the stars, running, always running
toward some place where I would never see
880 the shame of all those oracles come true.
And as I fled I reached that very spot
where the great king, you say, met his death.

Now, Jocasta, I will tell you all.
Making my way toward this triple crossroad
885 I began to see a herald, then a brace of colts
drawing a wagon, and mounted on the bench . . . a man,
just as you’ve described him, coming face-to-face,
and the one in the lead and the old man himself
were about to thrust me off the road—brute force—
890 and the one shouldering me aside, the driver,
I strike him in anger!—and the old man, watching me
coming up along his wheels—he brings down
his prod, two prongs straight at my head!
I paid him back with interest!
895 Short work, by god—with one blow of the staff
in this right hand I knock him out of his high seat,
roll him out of the wagon, sprawling headlong—
I killed them all—every mother’s son!

Oh, but if there is any blood-tie
900 between Laius and this stranger . . .
what man alive more miserable than I?
More hated by the gods? *I* am the man
no alien, no citizen welcomes to his house,
law forbids it—not a word to me in public,
905 driven out of every hearth and home.
And all these curses I—no one but I
brought down these piling curses on myself!
And you, his wife, I’ve touched your body with these,
the hands that killed your husband cover you with
blood.



910 Wasn't I born for torment? Look me in the eyes!
I am abomination—heart and soul!
I must be exiled, and even in exile
never see my parents, never set foot
on native ground again. Else I am doomed
915 to couple with my mother and cut my father down . . .
Polybus who reared me, gave me life.

911 abomination (ə-bŏm'ə-nā'shən): a disgusting thing.

But why, why?
Wouldn't a man of judgment say—and wouldn't he be
right—
some savage power has brought this down upon my
head?

920 Oh no, not that, you pure and awesome gods,
never let me see that day! Let me slip
from the world of men, vanish without a trace
before I see myself stained with such corruption,
stained to the heart.

Leader. My lord, you fill our hearts with fear.

925 But at least until you question the witness,
do take hope.

Oedipus. Exactly. He is my last hope—
I am waiting for the shepherd. He is crucial.

Jocasta. And once he appears, what then? Why so urgent?

Oedipus. I will tell you. If it turns out that his story
930 matches yours, I've escaped the worst.

Jocasta. What did I say? What struck you so?

Oedipus. You said *thieves*—
he told you a whole band of them murdered Laius.
So, if he still holds to the same number,
I cannot be the killer. One can't equal many.
935 But if he refers to one man, one alone,
clearly the scales come down on me:
I am guilty.

Jocasta. Impossible. Trust me,
I told you precisely what he said,
and he can't retract it now;
940 the whole city heard it, not just I.
And even if he should vary his first report
by one man more or less, still, my lord,
he could never make the murder of Laius

WORDS TO KNOW



truly fit the prophecy. Apollo was explicit:
945 my son was doomed to kill my husband . . . my son,
poor defenseless thing, he never had a chance
to kill his father. They destroyed him first.

So much for prophecy. It's neither here nor there.
From this day on, I wouldn't look right or left.

950 **Oedipus.** True, true. Still, that shepherd,
someone fetch him—now!

Jocasta. I'll send at once. But do let's go inside.
I'd never displease you, least of all in this.
(*Oedipus and Jocasta enter the palace.*)

PAUSE & REFLECT Jocasta has told Oedipus that Laius was killed at “a place where three roads meet.” Why does Oedipus become fearful when he hears this piece of information?

FOCUS The chorus now sings about the timeless laws that rule human life. Read to find out how the chorus feels about the old prophecies.

Chorus. Destiny guide me always
955 Destiny find me filled with reverence
pure in word and deed.
Great laws tower above us, reared on high
born for the brilliant vault of heaven—
Olympian Sky their only father,
960 nothing mortal, no man gave them birth,
their memory deathless, never lost in sleep:
within them lives a mighty god, the god does not
grow old.

Pride breeds the tyrant
violent pride, gorging, crammed to bursting
965 with all that is overripe and rich with ruin—
clawing up to the heights, headlong pride
crashes down the abyss—sheer doom!
No footing helps, all foothold lost and gone.
But the healthy strife that makes the city strong—
970 I pray that god will never end that wrestling:
god, my champion, I will never let you go.

969 strife: conflict.

WORDS TO KNOW

explicit (ɪk-splɪs'ɪt) *adj.* clear; definite



But if any man comes striding, high and mighty
in all he says and does,
no fear of justice, no reverence
975 for the temples of the gods—
let a rough doom tear him down,
repay his pride, breakneck, ruinous pride!
If he cannot reap his profits fairly
cannot restrain himself from outrage—
980 mad, laying hands on the holy things untouchable!

Can such a man, so desperate, still boast
he can save his life from the flashing bolts of god?
If all such violence goes with honor now
why join the sacred dance?

985 Never again will I go reverent to Delphi,
the inviolate heart of Earth
or Apollo's ancient oracle at Abae
or Olympia of the fires—
unless these prophecies all come true
990 for all mankind to point toward in wonder.
King of kings, if you deserve your titles
Zeus, remember, never forget!
You and your deathless, everlasting reign.

995 They are dying, the old oracles sent to Laius,
now our masters strike them off the rolls.
Nowhere Apollo's golden glory now—
the gods, the gods go down.

986 inviolate (ĭn-vī'ə-lĭt): pure.

987 Abae (ā'bē).

988 Olympia (ō-lĭm'pē-ə): the site of an oracle of Zeus.

Thinking Through the Literature

1. What did Oedipus do at “a place where three roads meet”?
2. Why did Oedipus run away from his home in Corinth?
3. How would you describe Jocasta's view of prophets and prophecies?
4. What is the chorus's attitude toward the old prophecies?